

# MAURITANIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mauritania is an Islamic Republic with a president as head of state and a constitution grounded in French civil law and sharia. The National Assembly exercises legislative functions but was weak relative to the executive. Voters elect the president, deputies to the National Assembly, municipal mayors, and regional councilors. In 2019 voters elected former Minister of Defense Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani as president with 52 percent of the vote. The election marked the first democratic transition of power between two elected presidents since the country's independence in 1960. United Nations and African Union observers considered the election to be relatively free and fair. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the Union for the Republic, the political party founded by former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, won 95 of 157 seats in the National Assembly.

The National Police, which is responsible for enforcing the law and maintaining order in urban areas, reports to the Ministry of Interior. The National Guard performs a limited police function in keeping with its peacetime role as the guarantor of physical security at government facilities, including prisons. The National Guard reports to the Ministry of Interior. Regional authorities may call upon the National Guard to restore civil order during riots and other large-scale disturbances. The gendarmerie, a specialized paramilitary organization under the authority of the Ministry of Defense, is responsible for maintaining civil order around metropolitan areas and providing law enforcement services in rural areas. The Ministry of Interior's General Group for Road Safety maintains security on roads and operates checkpoints throughout the country. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were reports that members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrests; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including criminal blasphemy laws; serious government corruption; lack of investigation and accountability for gender-based violence

including rape, domestic violence, female genital mutilation/cutting, sexual exploitation and abuse, and other forms of such violence; trafficking in persons, including continued existence of slavery and slavery-related practices; crimes involving violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and some of the worst forms of child labor.

The government took steps to identify, investigate, and punish officials who committed abuses and prosecuted some abusers, but some officials acted with impunity. Civil society organizations objected to the scant number of indictments handed down by authorities. The government also continued to take steps to investigate, prosecute, and punish officials involved in corruption.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person**

### **a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings**

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

### **b. Disappearance**

There were no reports of disappearances by, or on behalf of, government authorities.

### **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses**

The constitution and law prohibit such practices, but there were credible reports that government officials employed them. Complaints filed with the courts for allegations of torture were submitted to police for investigation. The government continued to deny the existence of “unofficial” detention centers, even though nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations pointed out their continued usage. Neither the National Mechanism for Prevention of Torture (MNP) nor the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) directly addressed the existence of these locations.

The MNP is an independent governmental body charged with investigating credible allegations of torture. The MNP conducted regular visits to prisons and police stations but had not conducted thorough investigations into the allegations of torture by security forces since its inception in 2016.

Impunity was a serious problem within the security forces, particularly among the General Group for Road Safety, the National Guard, and the National Police. Politicization, widespread corruption, and ethnic tensions between the Beydane-controlled security forces and Haratine (“Black Moor” or descendants of slaves) and sub-Saharan communities were primary factors contributing to impunity. NGOs alleged that security forces were involved in several cases of abuse. Cases of abuse were routinely investigated internally by security forces themselves without referring them to judicial authorities, indicating a certain level of impunity within security forces. Nonetheless, authorities sometimes took steps to refer cases to the criminal courts. For example, on February 11, authorities sentenced a police commissioner to five years in prison for assaulting a judge, but the sentence was not enforced because of his senior-level position, and the police commissioner remained free. On July 25, police used violence to break up a demonstration by the Officialization of National Languages (OLAN). Many persons were injured, including OLAN coordinator Doro Guèye. Police severely beat three other activists. There were no reports that authorities punished the officers who engaged in the beatings.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison conditions remained harsh and life threatening due to overcrowding, violence, inadequate sanitary conditions, lack of adequate medical care, and persistent food shortages.

**Abusive Physical Conditions:** Prisons remained overcrowded. For example, the Directorate of Penal Affairs and Prison Administration (DAPAP) maintained that the country’s largest prison, Dar Naim, held approximately three times the number of inmates more than its designed capacity. As of August 16, the total number of prisoners in the country rose to 2,826, half of whom were in pretrial detention. They included 57 women and 380 foreigners. According to World Prison Brief, the country’s 2018 prison capacity was 2,280.

Authorities frequently grouped pretrial detainees with convicts who presented a danger to other prisoners. Male guards frequently monitored female inmates, a practice criticized by the CNDH.

There were two separate prisons for women, one in the capital Nouakchott and the other in the country's second-largest city, Nouadhibou. Nearly all supervisors of female inmates came from the all-male National Guard, which was assigned the task of supervising prisons nationwide. The few women supervisors in prisons were not members of the National Guard, but rather members of civil protection teams (firefighters). Detention conditions for women were generally better than those for men. According to prison officials, the women's prison in Nouakchott was less crowded than prisons for men.

The Ministry of Justice operated a youth detention center in Nouakchott. The detention facility held 82 juveniles during the year. An Italian NGO continued to operate a separate detention center for juveniles, the only prison facility that came close to meeting international standards. These facilities operated in addition to youth detention centers located in police stations throughout the country.

Drugs were often trafficked among prisoners, which the government acknowledged was caused by lax security procedures regarding visitors. As in 2021, local NGOs reported that inmates partially managed one wing of the Dar Naim prison, a practice not uncommon in the country but with which DAPAP expressed unease. Narcotics, weapons, and cash reportedly circulated freely because staff could not effectively screen goods that entered the prison and could not safely enter some areas.

Human rights groups continued to deplore the lack of adequate sanitation and medical facilities in prisons nationwide, particularly in the Dar Naim Men's Prison and at the Central Civil Prison of Nouakchott. The government allocated a budget of 50 ouguiyas (\$1.35) a day for each prisoner for food.

**Administration:** Authorities permitted prisoners to file allegations of abuse with the CNDH and the MNP. Government regulations also allowed inmates to elect one representative for dealing with the prison administration, and prisoners occasionally made use of this opportunity. The government acknowledged

allegations of inhuman conditions and began to take corrective actions to improve living conditions. Authorities routinely transferred prisoners to prisons in the interior of the country, in part to alleviate the overcrowding in Nouakchott and to allow space for renovation and expansion work in Nouakchott prisons; however, these transfers often meant that prisoners were separated from their families and legal representatives and increased the average length of time prisoners were held in pretrial detention.

**Independent Monitoring:** The government permitted prison and detention center visits by NGOs, diplomats, and international human rights observers. The CNDH carried out unannounced visits to these detention centers. The International Committee of the Red Cross had unlimited access to prisons and conducted multiple visits, including visits to prisoners suspected of terrorist activities.

**Improvements:** According to the NGO Noura, the rehabilitation of Nouadhibou, Nema, and Kiffa's prisons and construction of a new facility in Nbeika helped curb prison overcrowding. The Central Civil Prison as well as the women's prison had some extensive work to provide better living conditions for the prisoners. Programs aimed at the social and vocational reintegration of prisoners were implemented by NGOs and the government's Prison Administration. For example, some prisons launched vocational training activities in trades such as welding and metalwork, plumbing, brickmaking, artisanal bakery, and others.

#### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these prohibitions and rights. A detainee has the legal right to challenge the lawfulness of his or her detention under two circumstances: first, if a person remains arrested after the end of his or her legal period of detention; and second, if the detainee disagrees with his or her sentence, in which case he or she has the right to file an appeal before a court of appeal or the Supreme Court.

#### **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

Authorities generally did not inform detainees of the accusations against them until

the conclusion of the police investigation. With few exceptions, individuals could not be detained for more than 48 hours without evidence, although prosecutors may extend the period for an additional 48 hours in some cases. Because nonbusiness days are not counted within this 48-hour maximum period, police sometimes arrested individuals on a Wednesday or Thursday to keep them in custody for a full week. If a person is detained on terrorism charges, that individual can be held in custody for as long as 45 days. The law requires that a suspect be brought before a judicial officer and charged with a crime within 48 hours; however, authorities generally did not respect this right.

During its Universal Periodic Review of the country in January 2021, the UN Human Rights Committee noted that police records of detainees were poorly maintained. Only after the prosecutor submits charges does a suspect have the right to contact an attorney. By law indigent defendants are entitled to an attorney at state expense, but legal representation was frequently either unavailable or attorneys did not speak the defendant's language (and defendants were not always provided interpretation services). Since 2021, the government completed staffing for legal aid offices throughout the country. These legal aid offices were provided for by law, and they helped victims and defendants to access the legal resources available to them. Judges sometimes arbitrarily refused requests for bail or set inordinately high bail amounts.

**Arbitrary Arrest:** During the year authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained protesters, human rights activists, and journalists (see section 2.a.). In April, blogger Hamda Ould Oubeidallah was released after six months of imprisonment following a Facebook video posting in which he insulted the president and criticized government inability to solve citizens' living conditions problems.

In May, Mohamed Ould Yacouba, a whistleblower, was arrested following a complaint from the Mauritanian Bank of Investment. The blogger had alleged the bank dispensed counterfeit notes of 1,000 ouguiyas (\$27). As of year's end, Yacouba's case was still open, and he remained under judicial supervision.

**Pretrial Detention:** Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem. According to DAPAP, the average length for pretrial detention was six to 12 months, and approximately 50 percent of the prison population were pretrial

detainees. Members of the security forces sometimes arrested demonstrators and held them longer than the legal maximum time, often due to a lack of capacity to process cases in a timely manner, and in some cases to obtain confessions. By law authorities may not hold a juvenile for more than six months while the detainee awaits trial. Nevertheless, there were reports of many individuals, including juveniles, remaining in pretrial detention for excessively long periods due to judicial inefficiency, although the length of pretrial detention rarely, if ever, equaled or exceeded the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most jurisdictions stopped processing cases, and both the rate and length of pretrial detention increased. While cases resumed to a regular pace as the COVID-19 pandemic dissipated in the middle of the year, a significant backlog of outstanding cases remained.

#### **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality. Nevertheless, the executive branch continued to exercise significant influence over the judiciary through its ability to appoint and remove judges. Authorities did not always respect or enforce court orders. Observers generally perceived judges to be corrupt, unskilled, and subject to social and tribal pressures.

#### **Trial Procedures**

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right. The law requires that authorities inform defendants of the charges against them within 48 hours, but the government did not normally respect this provision. Defendants often did not learn of the charges against them until the police investigation was complete. Defendants, including the indigent, have the right to legal counsel, but authorities generally did not respect this right.

Defendants did not always have access to free interpretation if they could not speak or understand the language of the court. Sharia is, in part, the basis for trial procedures. Courts generally did not treat women equally with men during these proceedings.

## **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

## **Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies**

Complaints of human rights abuses fall within the jurisdiction of the Administrative Court. Individuals or organizations may appeal decisions to international and regional courts. NGO representatives, including the Association of Women Heads of Households, stated they collaborated with the Administrative Court but criticized it for being biased and not taking their reports seriously. There are administrative remedies through the social chambers in both the court of appeals and the Supreme Court.

### **f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The constitution prohibits such actions, although there were numerous reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions. For example, authorities often entered homes without judicial or other appropriate authorization.

### **g. Conflict-related abuses**

Peacekeepers from the country deployed to the Central African Republic were implicated in abuses.

**Physical Abuse, Punishment and Torture:** According to the *Conduct in UN Field Missions* online portal, there were five open allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by the country's peacekeepers deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic from 2019 to the end of the year. The most recent allegation was reported in August and concerned rape and sexual exploitation involving four of the country's peacekeepers. As of September, UN and government investigations into all five allegations remained pending.



## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media**

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government arbitrarily and selectively applied regulations to suppress individuals or groups of individuals who opposed government policies.

**Freedom of Expression:** Individuals were generally free to criticize the government publicly but were occasionally subject to retaliation. The constitution and law prohibit racial or ethnic propaganda; however, the government sometimes used these provisions against political opponents, accusing them of “racism” or “promoting national disunity” for speaking out against the extreme underrepresentation in government of disadvantaged populations, namely the Haratines and sub-Saharan Africans. On July 28, the Nouakchott Criminal Court sentenced blogger Tijani Wone to two months in prison after he released a Facebook Live broadcast in which he criticized the president and his government for not efficiently fixing the country’s problems. The Nouakchott Court of Appeal granted him a provisional release after one month of detention.

In November 2021, the government adopted a law criminalizing criticism and derogatory comments of the country’s national symbols, including the flag, the national anthem, Islam, and the president. The law reinforces and slightly expands previous laws and decrees by including specific references to the use of digital media (e.g., social media, WhatsApp messages, voice messages, and photographs). The law caused widespread controversy prior to its adoption, and many NGOs and human rights activists declared the law unduly restricted freedom of expression. On June 2, the Nouakchott West Criminal Court convicted seven activists under the new law, Ahmed Mhfoudh Ould Nah, Djiby Ba Gelongal, Moussa Camara, Mohamed Salem Ould Beib, Ould Massaoud, Moulaye Hachim, and Moussa Boubacar, and sentenced them from two to four years in prison on charges of inciting hate speech against an ethnic community. Those convicted under this controversial law included members from all the country’s main ethnic groups

(White and Black Moor, Peul, Soninke, and Wolof). They spent two to three months in prison before the Nouakchott Court of Appeal acquitted them.

**Violence and Harassment:** There were cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists during the year.

On August 20, the prosecutor of Nouakchott West subpoenaed and interviewed Moussa Samba Sy, director of the publication of the daily newspaper *Quotidien de Nouakchott* on August 20, following a complaint from a local bank (see section 5).

**Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media:** Independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with limited restrictions. Incidents of government retaliation against media decreased compared with the previous year. Independent media remained the principal source of information for most citizens, followed by government media. Government media focused primarily on official news but provided some coverage of opposition activities and views.

**Libel/Slander Laws:** There is a law against blasphemy, which is punishable by death, although the country last carried out an execution in 1987. There were no prosecutions for blasphemy during the year.

**National Security:** The government sometimes cited laws protecting national security and social cohesion to detain critics of the government and deter criticism of governmental policies.

### **Internet Freedom**

The government sometimes disrupted access to the internet and sometimes arrested persons for expressing political or religious views online that criticized the government. On May 17, police arrested Mohamed Yeslem, an activist who appeared in an online video denouncing government racism and a double standard in the way it enforces laws. Police released Yeslem two weeks after his arrest. On August 31, the Nouakchott Court of Appeals confirmed the four-year prison sentence issued in mid-June against a Haratine scholar, Hassan Suleiman Bedi. Hassan released a video online in which he questioned the genealogy of some influential tribes in the country. Hassan's sentence was reduced to two years, and

he remained in prison. There was no evidence that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

## **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The constitution and law provide for freedom of peaceful assembly and association, but the government sometimes restricted these freedoms. The government, however, increasingly took steps to respect these rights, including by enacting a law that makes it easier for NGOs to register and operate.

### **Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

The constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly. Registered political parties are not required to seek permission to hold meetings or demonstrations. The law requires NGO organizers to apply for permission to hold large meetings or assemblies. Authorities usually granted permission but, on some occasions, denied it for reasons that NGOs claimed were politically motivated. Security forces were sometimes violent in dispersing protesters. On July 25, police violently repressed a Nouakchott demonstration held by young Afro-Mauritanians expressing their opposition to the country's controversial new education law. Demonstrators considered the law an attempt to further Arabic as the language of education. Several persons were injured during the clampdown, including a journalist.

On May 30, the Minister of Interior, Mohamed Ahmed Ould Mohamed Lemine, sent a circular to provincial governors, local prefects, and the heads of administrative centers ordering them not to authorize any political demonstrations or meetings other than those held by political parties or civil society organizations. According to NGOs such as Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), this decision appeared to be aimed at countering the many ethnic, fractional, and caste demonstrations that, according to the government, were harmful to national unity, social cohesion, and civil peace.

### **Freedom of Association**

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. The government continued to register NGOs throughout the year under a relevant law adopted in 2021. By December 19, the government had

registered more than 3,400 NGOs.

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

### **d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country**

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. The government generally respected these rights, with some exceptions.

**In-country Movement:** Persons lacking identity cards could not travel freely in some regions. As in previous years, government security and safety measures included frequent use of mobile roadblocks where gendarmes, police, or customs officials checked the papers of travelers.

### **e. Protection of Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. Resources provided by the government were inadequate to meet the assistance needs of these populations.

**Access to Asylum:** The law provides for granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The UNHCR carries out refugee status determinations under its mandate and then presents cases to the National Consultative Commission for Refugees for recognition. In September, the government facilitated screening by foreign government representatives of more than 100 refugees registered with UNHCR, mostly Senegalese from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community, for political asylum in the foreign country.

In accordance with agreements with the Economic Community of West African

States on freedom of movement, the government allows West Africans to remain in the country for up to three months, after which they must apply for residency or work permits. On July 24, the government launched a campaign to grant foreign residents a three-month period to register as legal residents, which ended in November.

Authorities immediately deported migrants determined to be illegally seeking to reach Spain's nearby Canary Islands, although authorities regularly worked with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration to screen for vulnerable migrants prior to deportation.

#### **f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons**

Not applicable.

#### **g. Stateless Persons**

According to the law, children born to citizen fathers and foreign mothers are automatically citizens, whether born inside or outside the country. The law does not grant women the same ability as men to confer nationality to their children when born outside of the country, but those children are able to obtain Mauritanian nationality at age 17. If the father is stateless, children born outside the country are subject to statelessness until age 17, at which point the child is eligible for nationality. The unwillingness of local authorities to process thousands of sub-Saharan Africans who returned from Senegal following their mass expulsion between 1989 and 1991 rendered the returnees stateless. Many Haratine children also faced difficulties obtaining civil status documents, since authorities required proof of identity from both parents.

### **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

The constitution provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

## **Elections and Political Participation**

**Recent Elections:** Voters elected former Minister of Defense Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani as president with 52 percent of the vote in the 2019 presidential election. Observers from the United Nations and African Union judged the election to be relatively free and fair. The elections represented the first transition of power from one democratically elected leader to another since the country's independence in 1960.

In 2018, the party founded by the former president, the Union for the Republic, won 95 of 157 seats in the National Assembly in legislative elections.

**Political Parties and Political Participation:** There are some restrictions on the ability of political parties to register. By decree all political parties must be able to gain at least 1 percent of votes in two consecutive elections to continue to operate legally and receive government funding, and this decree continued to limit the overall number of political parties that could participate. As a result, the number of political parties dropped from 103 in 2019 to 25. The government did not approve registration for previously denied activist parties, including the Forces of Progressive Change and the Refoundation for Global Action led by Haratine and sub-Saharan leaders.

The government took some steps to address the ethnic disparity in political leadership. Under the previous regime, the Beydane elite ("White Moor" Arabs) accounted for at most 30 percent of the population but occupied approximately 80 percent of government leadership positions; Haratines constituted at least 45 percent of the population but held fewer than 10 percent of the positions; and the various sub-Saharan ethnic groups (Halpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof) constituted an estimated 25 percent of the population and accounted for fewer than 10 percent of leadership positions. Of the 28 ministers in the sitting cabinet, three come from a Haratine ethnic background, and six come from a sub-Saharan ethnic background. Unlike in previous governments, the existing cabinet was largely made up of technocrats.

**Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups:** No laws limit the participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and

they did participate. Traditional and cultural factors restricted women from participating in political life on an equal basis with men. Traditional and cultural factors also prevented persons with disabilities and LGBTQI+ persons from participating in political life on the same basis as nonminority citizens.

## **Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government**

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by government officials, but authorities did not enforce the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were numerous reports of government corruption during the year.

**Corruption:** Corruption was a serious problem in public administration, although the government sometimes held officials accountable. There were reports government officials used their power to obtain personal favors, such as unauthorized exemption from taxes, special grants of land, and preferential treatment during bidding on government projects. Corruption was most pervasive in government procurement but was also common in the distribution of official documents, fishing and mining licenses, land distribution, as well as in bank loans and tax payments. Over the course of the year, the government dismissed approximately 20 officials for engaging in corrupt practices. Authorities told those fired to reimburse the amounts they allegedly embezzled within one month to avoid being put in pretrial detention.

In March 2021, authorities charged former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and 12 other persons with mismanagement of state property, bribery, illicit enrichment, obstruction of justice, and money laundering. On June 3, the investigative judge of the country's Anti-Corruption Unit decided to refer all 13, including several former ministers and close Aziz family members, to be tried by the anticorruption criminal court. Aziz's house arrest ended on September 7. The government returned his passports, and he traveled to France on September 23 for medical check-ups. On December 13, the Supreme Court rejected the appeal submitted by Aziz's defense team and referred the case to the Nouakchott Anti-Corruption Court. On the same day, the Supreme Court dismissed charges for two

of the 13 defendants, not including Aziz.

## **Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

Several domestic and international human rights groups operated without government restrictions, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were mostly cooperative and responsive to their requests for information. Several domestic and international groups also reported evidence during the year of a continued change in attitude under the new government, citing statements by government human rights bodies calling attention to international laws and conventions protecting human rights, as well as an increased willingness to work with human rights groups.

On March 16, top officials from the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement and other civil society groups opened a three-day subregional symposium organized by the G5 Sahel's Anti-Slavery Network. The government approved the event, which drew more than 1,000 members of antislavery movements from across West Africa and the Sahel region.

Nevertheless, there were restrictions on some human rights groups, particularly those investigating cases of slavery and slavery-related practices. For example, authorities sometimes denied NGOs' access to prosecutors' offices or to alleged victims while investigating possible slavery or slavery-related cases. On May 30, following a complaint from the antislavery NGO IRA, the prosecutor of Brakna region ordered the preventive detention of two alleged human traffickers, including the father of the victim of the case, age 10. IRA representatives noted that the government prevented them from accessing the victim in the case.

**The United Nations or Other International Bodies:** Tomoya Obokata, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, conducted a 10-day visit to the country, May 4 to 13.

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The Commissariat for Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Relations with Civil Society (CDHAHRSC) designs,



promotes, and implements national human rights policies. The commissariat managed government and internationally funded human rights and humanitarian assistance programs. Separate to the government-run commissariat, the CNDH is an independent ombudsperson organization, which includes government and civil society representatives. It actively monitored human rights conditions and advocated for government action to correct abuses. The CNDH produced an annual report on human rights topics, conducted regular investigations, including prison and police detention center facility visits, conducted information caravans throughout the country to combat slavery, and made recommendations to the government.

## **Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses**

### **Women**

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** Rape of women is illegal. The law does not address rape of men. Rapists who are single men face penalties of imprisonment, forced labor, and whipping; married rapists are subject to the death penalty, although this penalty was last enforced in 1987. The government increasingly enforced the law and issued prison sentences for convicted rapists, but prosecutions remained unevenly applied. Nevertheless, as in years past, wealthy rape suspects reportedly avoided prosecution or, if prosecuted, avoided prison. It was common for the families of rape survivors to reach an agreement with the perpetrator in the form of monetary compensation.

Rape survivors were discouraged from reporting the crime because they themselves could be jailed for having intercourse outside of marriage. Reliable data on gender-based violence remained sparse, and the situation of children and women who were survivors of abuse was poorly documented. The subject remained taboo due to social mores and traditional norms, which often called for survivors to be rejected by their family and society. In April and May, local media reported two cases of infanticide involving young Haratine domestic workers who became pregnant as a result of rape. Fatimetou Mint Bilal was sentenced to 12 years in prison on charges of adultery and infanticide after a police officer repeatedly raped her in her employer's house. Another young woman, ElGhalia Moulaye, was raped by a soldier, gave birth in front of a health center, and the

baby died. At year's end, she was in preventive detention and charged with committing adultery (*Zina* in Arabic).

Spousal abuse and domestic violence are illegal, but there are no specific penalties for domestic violence. The government did not enforce the law effectively, and convictions were rare.

Police and the judiciary occasionally intervened in domestic abuse cases, but women rarely sought legal redress, relying instead on family, NGOs, and community leaders to resolve their domestic disputes. NGOs reported that, in certain cases, they sought police assistance to protect survivors of domestic violence, but police declined to investigate.

**Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C):** The law states that any act or attempt to damage a girl's sexual organs is punishable by imprisonment and a monetary fine. Authorities seldom applied the law due to lack of awareness of the law that bans the practice, and traditional and religious beliefs supporting the practice. According to a 2021 UNICEF study, 50 percent of girls had undergone FGM/C, and the study found that in certain regions the prevalence was higher than 90 percent. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood, and Family continued to track the more than 2,000 traditional health providers who abandoned the practice of FGM/C to ensure that they would not start the practice again.

**Other Forms of Gender-based Violence:** Traditional forms of mistreatment of women continued to decline. One of these was the forced feeding of adolescent girls prior to marriage, practiced by some Beydane families. Some girls were forced to eat up to 16,000 calories a day for two months or face physical punishments from family members.

**Sexual Harassment:** There are no laws against sexual harassment. Women's NGOs reported that sexual harassment was a common problem in the workplace.

**Reproductive Rights:** There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities. According to NGOs, doctors continued to perform so-called virginity tests, particularly in cases of rape and sexual violence.

Social and cultural barriers significantly limited access to contraception, including misinformation that contraception causes cancerous diseases, death, or infertility. Contraceptives were not widely available in health centers, and some religious fatwas forbid the use of contraception without the husband's permission. For unmarried women, stigma impeded access to contraception. According to the 2019-21 *Demographic and Health Survey* for the country, the contraceptive prevalence rate for women ages 15 to 49, with any method, was 14 percent.

According to the law, women have the right to a childbirth assisted by qualified health personnel, but many women lacked access to those services. Social stigmas and conservative sociocultural factors limited access to information and health services, particularly for adolescents.

The government provided limited access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. A unit in the Maternity and Child Center in Nouakchott treated female victims of sexual violence. This unit also gave women emergency contraception to prevent pregnancy after cases of rape. Access to these services was uncommon outside of Nouakchott, and even when services were available, women were often discouraged by their immediate family from seeking assistance after incidents of sexual violence.

According to the government's 2019 *Demographic and Health Survey*, the maternal mortality rate for the seven years preceding the 2019-21 survey was 424 deaths per 100,000 births. The high maternal mortality rate was due to a lack of medical equipment, few programs promoting prenatal care for mothers, births without the assistance of health professionals, poor sanitation, malnutrition, and high rates of adolescent pregnancy. FGM/C was a significant problem and contributed to maternal morbidity. (See the Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) subsection for additional information.) In 2020, the UN Population Division estimated the birth rate among adolescents (girls ages 15 to 19) to be 67 per 1,000.

Girls' access to education was affected by pregnancy and motherhood status, since many girls who became pregnant dropped out of school to care for their child either voluntarily or because of social stigmatization.

**Discrimination:** Women have legal rights to property and child custody, and the more educated and urbanized women were more likely to enjoy these rights. Nevertheless, women in general had fewer legal rights than men.

Additionally, women faced other forms of legal discrimination. According to sharia as applied in the country, the testimony of two women was required to equal that of one man. The courts granted only one-half as large an indemnity to the family of a female victim as that accorded to the family of a male victim. The personal status code provides a framework for the consistent application of secular law and sharia-based family law, but judicial officials did not always respect it. There are legal restrictions on women's employment, including limitations on working in occupations deemed dangerous and certain industries, including mining and construction.

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

The law provides that all citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity, are equal. Nevertheless, Haratines (the "Black Moors" and the former slave caste) and sub-Saharanans often faced discrimination from the country's Beydane ("White Moors") community. Police often tolerated discrimination towards the Haratines and sub-Saharanans because the security services were largely controlled by Beydane.

Haratine and sub-Saharan ethnic groups faced governmental discrimination, while the Beydane ethnic group received governmental preference. For example, individuals living across the border in Western Sahara (who are of Beydane ethnicity) easily obtained national identity cards required to vote, although they were not citizens. Meanwhile, Haratine (Arab slave descendants) and sub-Saharan (non-Arab) citizens often had great difficulty obtaining national identity documents.

Racial and cultural tension and discrimination also arose from the geographic, linguistic, and cultural divides between Moors (Beydane and Haratine) – who while historically representing a mix of Berber, Arab, and sub-Saharan Africans, today largely identified culturally and linguistically as Arab – and the sub-Saharan non-Arab minorities. Historically, the Beydane ("White Moors") enslaved the Haratine population ("Black Moors"); some hereditary slavery continued, and

Haratines continued to suffer from the legacy of centuries of slavery (see section 7.b.). Beydane tribes and clans dominated positions in government and business far beyond their proportion of the population. As a group, the Haratines remained politically and economically weaker than the Beydane, although they represented the largest ethnocultural group in the country. The various sub-Saharan ethnic groups, along with the Haratines, remained underrepresented in leadership positions in government, industry, and the military (see section 3). President Ghazouani increased the number of Haratines and sub-Saharans in leadership positions, most notably by appointing a Haratine as prime minister.

The government took steps to mitigate the economic factors that contributed to the problem and to promote social cohesion. For example, a new government agency, the General Delegation for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion, or Taazour, was created in 2019 to intensify government efforts to combat slavery and address the social and economic conditions that left many citizens vulnerable to forced labor. Taazour was implementing projects to improve living conditions and provide skills to members of historically marginalized communities. The institution had the authority to coordinate projects of other government agencies to maximize their impact. Taazour had an agreement with the CNDH to facilitate efforts by beneficiaries of Taazour projects to seek redress for any abuse of their civil rights.

## **Children**

**Birth Registration:** By law a person derives citizenship from one's father. One can derive citizenship from one's mother under either of the following conditions: if the mother is a citizen and the father's nationality is unknown or he is stateless, or if the child was born in the country to a citizen mother and the child repudiates the father's nationality a year before reaching majority. Children born abroad to citizen mothers and foreign men can acquire citizenship one year before reaching the majority age of 18. Minor children of parents who are naturalized citizens are also eligible for citizenship.

The process of registering a child and subsequently receiving a birth certificate was reportedly difficult. The government requires proof of marriage and biological parents' citizenship for children to obtain a birth certificate. As a result, children

born out of wedlock, including many Haratine and Sub-Saharan ethnic minority children of slave descent, were prevented from being registered at birth. Failure to register could result in denial of some public services, such as education.

**Education:** The law mandates six years of school attendance for all children, but the law was not effectively enforced. Many children did not attend school for the mandatory six years. According to the UNICEF country office 2021 annual report, one in three children ages seven to 19 did not attend school. The proportion was higher among boys (33.5 percent) than girls (31.7 percent).

Children of lower castes from both Haratine and sub-Saharan families often did not receive any formal education.

**Child Abuse:** There are laws against child abuse, although authorities rarely applied them. Authorities also rarely investigated allegations of child abuse in homes or schools.

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage:** The legal marriage age is 18, but authorities rarely enforced the law, and child marriage was widespread. Since consensual sex outside of marriage is illegal, a legal guardian can ask local authorities to permit a girl younger than 18 to marry. Local authorities frequently granted permission. The government continued to work with UNICEF to implement a program to combat child marriage through a series of judicial and political reforms.

**Sexual Exploitation of Children:** The law prohibits sexual relations with a child younger than 18, with penalties of six months to two years in prison and a fine. Possession of child pornography is illegal, with penalties of two months to one year in prison and a fine. Commercial sexual exploitation of children is illegal. NGOs, such as the Association of Women Heads of Households, asserted the laws were not properly enforced.

**Infanticide, Including Infanticide of Children with Disabilities:** Survivors of rape were sometimes also accused of infanticide (see section 6, Women, Rape and Domestic Violence).

**Displaced Children:** An October 2021 survey by the International Organization for Migration found 18,864 displaced and migrant children living in Bassikounou,

Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and Sélibaby. Of those children, 61 percent were boys and nearly one in two was a victim of forced begging. Other problems included lack of documentation (36 percent of migrant children), homelessness (16 percent), labor exploitation (12 percent), and abuse and violence (11 percent).

## **Antisemitism**

A very small number of foreign residents practiced Judaism. There were no reports of antisemitic acts.

## **Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics**

**Criminalization:** Under sharia, as applied in the country, consensual same-sex sexual activity between men is punishable by death if witnessed by four individuals, and such activity between women is punishable by three months to two years in prison and a fine. The government did not enforce the law criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual activity.

LGBTQI+ persons were sometimes harassed and arbitrarily arrested by security forces. On May 26, police in the town of Teyarett arrested a group of six persons accused of “unnatural acts.” They were released after a few days in police custody. Acts of intimidation against LGBTQI+ persons were recurrent both by authorities and ordinary citizens.

**Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons:** LGBTQI+ persons were reportedly harassed and subjected to violence from the National Police, the General Group for Road Safety, neighbors, and family members. According to the National Solidarity Association, an LGBTQI+ NGO, conditions for LGBTQI+ persons were better than previous years, including less harassment by public authorities and an increased ability to meet discreetly without difficulties. Members of this

community, however, were still forced to keep their sexual orientation private.

**Discrimination:** No laws protect LGBTQI+ persons from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. LGBTQI+ persons faced discrimination from some health-care personnel, such as denial of service, because of their sexual orientation. LGBTQI+ identity was rarely publicly identified or discussed, which observers attributed to the severity of the stigma and the legal penalties attached to it.

**Availability of Legal Gender Recognition:** The country does not permit individuals to change their gender identity marker on legal and identifying documents to bring them into alignment with their gender identity.

**Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals:** There were no reported cases of involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices targeting LGBTQI+ individuals during the year.

**Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:** Public demonstration of LGBTQI+ status or identity was taboo according to local custom and law and was restricted by social pressure and law. Freedom of association was restricted, and same-sex marriage is criminalized. While organizations that promote the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons were not permitted officially, informal organizations were tolerated when operating discreetly. In view of the social stigmatization associated with LGBTQI+ identity, most LGBTQI+ persons hid their identities to avoid problems with family, friends, or government authorities.

## **Persons with Disabilities**

Persons with disabilities generally did not have access to education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others, including for deaf and blind persons in accessible formats. The law provides for access to information and communication, and to existing public buildings through retrofitting and future buildings through amendments to the building code. Authorities did not enforce the law effectively. Authorities did not provide information and communication on disability concerns in accessible formats.



The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities. Nevertheless, private discrimination in employment and occupation, housing, and health care was common. Children with disabilities attended school through secondary education at a significantly lower rate than other children.

## **Other Societal Violence or Discrimination**

Like other minority groups, the law protects persons with albinism from discrimination, but authorities did not enforce the law. Persons with albinism were reportedly discriminated against in the workplace, and employers tended not to hire persons with albinism. This practice was particularly prevalent in the service and restaurant industry.

Persons with HIV and AIDS were often isolated due to societal taboos and prejudice associated with the disease but were gradually becoming more accepted within society and by the government.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

The law allows all workers, except members of police, armed forces, and foreign and migrant workers, to form and join independent unions of their choice at local and national levels and provides for the right to conduct legal strikes and to bargain collectively. Other provisions and laws severely restrict or excessively regulate these rights. The government did not effectively enforce applicable laws that allow for unions to conduct strikes.

Prior approval by authorities is required before a union may be recognized. The public prosecutor must authorize all trade unions before they enjoy legal status. The public prosecutor may provisionally suspend a trade union at the request of the Ministry of Interior if its officials believe the union did not comply with the law. The law also provides that authorities may initiate legal proceedings against union leaders who undermine public order or make false statements. This law in effect authorizes administrative authorities to dissolve, suspend, or deregister trade union organizations unilaterally.

Noncitizens do not have the right to become trade union officials unless they have worked in the country and in the profession represented by the trade union for at least five years. Labor unions must obtain government authorization to hold labor elections. Despite previous promises, the government had not authorized union elections since 2014.

Bargaining collectively at the national level requires previous authorization or approval by the president, who decides how collective bargaining is organized. No such authorization is required for collective bargaining at the company level. The minister of labor, public service, and modernization of the administration may call for bargaining among employers, employees, labor unions, and the government. In addition, the ministry is entitled to take part in the preparation of collective agreements. The law provides that the meeting must occur 15 days following a statement of nonagreement between parties. Some public service employees not governed by existing legislation have simple collective agreements but not the full range of collective bargaining rights.

The law provides for the right to strike, except for those working in services deemed essential. Aggrieved parties must follow complex procedures before conducting a strike. If negotiations between workers and employers fail to produce an agreement, the case is referred to the Court of Arbitration. If the court fails to broker a mutually satisfactory agreement, workers may have to wait up to four additional months before they can legally strike, and the union is required to submit official notification to the employer that conciliation efforts have broken down. The government may also dissolve a union for what it considers an illegal or politically motivated strike. The law prohibits workers from holding sit-ins or blocking nonstriking workers from entering work premises. The law requires advance notice of one month for civil service unions and at least 10 working days in the private sector before a strike. The law provides the government with authority to determine the legality of a strike but no right of appeal for unions. The law prohibits certain types of strikes such as the peaceful occupation of workplaces or their immediate surroundings.

The government did not enforce the law effectively and did not provide adequate resources for inspections. While authorities seldom punished violators, the government ordered the reinstatement of workers who were wrongfully terminated

or directed companies to improve employee benefits and services on several occasions. While antiunion discrimination is illegal, national human rights groups such as Women Heads of Households and unions reported authorities did not actively investigate alleged antiunion practices in some private firms. Collective bargaining at the company level remained rare.

Registration and strike procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. Labor ministry officials routinely issued notices calling on all parties to negotiate. Such notices legally restrict workers from striking for a period of four months. Workers and unions organized several strikes and, unlike in previous years, authorities did not employ force to disperse them.

## **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

The law prohibits and criminalizes forced or compulsory labor, including the practice of slavery, and imposes penalties, both on government officials who do not act in response to reported cases and on those who benefit from contracting forced labor. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. The constitution and law make the offense “a crime against humanity.” The law grants civil society organizations the right to file complaints in court on behalf of victims as civil parties; however, many civil society organizations reported difficulty in filing complaints on behalf of victims. The law also provides free legal assistance for victims and refers to their right to compensation. Although the government took more steps towards ending the practice of slavery, including increased engagement with civil society groups, efforts to enforce the antislavery law were considered inadequate by NGOs, such as SOS Esclaves and IRA, as well as some human rights activists. The government allocated 1,800,000 ouguiyas (\$48,600) to the antislavery courts during the year, but the courts still lacked adequate funding to carry out their mandate.

In 2021, the prime minister gave the CDHAHRSC the power to introduce cases on behalf of victims of slavery as a “civil party,” although it had not yet used this authority. The new Law of Associations (NGO Law), however, does not allow for NGOs to formally introduce cases on behalf of victims or act as a civil party in a court of law, although several antislavery organizations continued to refer potential

cases to authorities. On June 1, the Nouadhibou Criminal Court sentenced Thierno Amadou and three of his accomplices to 10 years in prison for trafficking in persons related to forced labor.

On June 14, the city of Nema's Anti-Slavery Court sentenced a Soninke man, age 71, to a two-year prison sentence for committing slavery-related slander (for example, using racist insults or calling someone a "slave"), a criminal offense under the 2015 Anti-Slavery Law. A judge reduced the sentence to six months in prison with the remainder suspended.

Slavery and slavery-like practices, which typically flowed from ancestral master-slave relationships and involved both adults and children, continued. Although reliable data on the total number of slaves did not exist, the Global Slavery Index estimated in 2018 that hereditary slavery and slavery-like conditions affected a small but not insignificant portion of the rural and urban population. Enslaved persons suffered from traditional chattel slavery, including forced labor and sex trafficking. Human rights groups reported that masters coerced persons in slavery and slavery-like relationships to deny to human rights activists that such exploitative relationships existed.

Former victims of slavery and their descendants remained in a dependent status vis-a-vis their former slave masters due to a variety of factors, including obstacles faced in obtaining identification documents and civil registration for persons born out of wedlock, cultural traditions, a lack of marketable skills, poverty, and persistent drought. Some former victims of slavery and descendants were forced to revert to a de facto slave status by working for their former masters in exchange for some combination of lodging, food, and medical care. Some former victims of slavery reportedly continued to work for their former masters or others under exploitative conditions to retain access to land that they traditionally farmed. Although the law provides for distribution of land to the landless, including to former victims of slavery, authorities rarely enforced the law.

Former victims of slavery in subservient circumstances were also vulnerable to mistreatment. Women with children faced particular difficulties. Because they were particularly vulnerable, lacked the resources to live independently from their former masters, and had children who frequently lacked birth certificates or other

documentation required for school attendance and basic services, they could be compelled to remain in a condition of servitude, performing domestic duties, tending fields, or herding animals without remuneration.

Some former victims of slavery were coerced into continuing to work for their former masters, who relied on adherence to religious teachings and a fear of divine punishment to keep these individuals enslaved. Former victims of slavery were often subjected to social discrimination and limited to performing low-skilled, manual labor.

Slavery, including forced labor and de facto slavery, were more prevalent in rural areas where educational levels were generally low or a barter economy still prevailed, and prevalent to a lesser degree in urban centers, including Nouakchott. The practices commonly occurred where there was a need for workers to herd livestock, tend fields, and do other manual or household labor, and in urban centers where young children, often girls, were retained as unpaid domestic servants (see section 7.c.).

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

### **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/> and the Department of Labor's *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods/>.

### **d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation**

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, disability, religion, political opinion, national origin, citizenship, social origin, gender identity, age, or language, but the government generally did not enforce the law. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. Penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations. For example, in conformity with long-standing practice, the employment and advancement of both Haratines and sub-Saharanans in the armed services, the National Police, and civil administrative jobs remained limited. In

2021, the government enacted a dual nationality law that allows dual citizens to work in the government and participate in political life. The new law does not allow for dual citizens to run for president or become the prime minister, the president of the national assembly, or a minister of sovereignty (i.e., minister of foreign affairs, defense, Islamic affairs, or interior). Challenges faced by former slaves, descendants of slaves, and persons born out of wedlock in obtaining national identification documents prevented these groups from obtaining employment.

The law provides that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. The two largest employers, the civil service and the state mining company, observed this law; most employers in the private sector reportedly did not. In the modern wage sector, women also received family benefits, including three months of paid maternity leave. Women faced widespread employment discrimination, because employers usually preferred to hire men, with women overrepresented in low-paying positions (see section 6). There are legal restrictions on women's employment, including limitations on working in occupations deemed dangerous or morally inappropriate, and certain industries, including mining and construction.

## **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

**Wage and Hour Laws:** The law provides for a national minimum wage that is higher than the most recent estimate for the poverty income level. The law provides that the standard legal nonagricultural workweek must not exceed either 40 hours or six days per week. Domestic workers and certain other categories may work 56 hours per week. There are no legal provisions regarding compulsory overtime. Alleged violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in domestic and household work, agriculture, fishing, and mining sectors.

The International Labor Organization reported that the labor inspectorate was subject to undue influence by employers and the government, thereby reducing the effectiveness of inspection activity.

**Occupational Safety and Health:** The government sets occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, and in principle workers have the right to remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment;

however, this was rarely applied. These standards apply only to the formal sector, and labor inspectors rarely identified unsafe conditions or responded to workers' complaints.

In January, the Ministry of Labor enacted a hazardous work list. The list identified 44 types of activities that are prohibited for children, including street vending, domestic work, and stone crushing. Alleged violations of OSH standards were common in mining, fishing, industrial, and construction sectors. The National Agency of Social Security registered 134 workplace injuries, of which 20 resulted in fatalities, during the year, most of which occurred in the mining sector.

**Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement:** The Labor Office of the Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing labor laws but did not do so effectively. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient for the labor force, and inspectors have the authority to make unannounced inspections. The Ministry of Labor was responsible for ensuring OSH standards. Inspections for OSH were conducted by the same inspectors under the same authorities as wage and hours. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws, and penalties were not commensurate with those for comparable violations.

**Informal Sector:** The majority of the working population labored in the informal sector, primarily in subsistence agriculture, fishing, domestic services, and animal husbandry. According to the General Confederation of Mauritanian Workers, only 25 percent of workers filled positions that provided regular pay.

Informal-sector workers are not covered by inspections or by wage, hour, OSH, and labor laws. Labor unions pointed to conditions approaching forced labor in several sectors, including the food processing industry. In these sectors workers did not have contracts or receive pay stubs. Their salaries were below the official minimum wage, and they worked in unfavorable conditions. They occasionally did not receive pay for several months.

Working conditions in the fishing industry were similarly difficult. Commercial fishermen reportedly often exceeded 40 hours of work per week without receiving overtime pay. Additionally, some factory workers employed by fish-processing plants and boat manufacturers did not receive contracts guaranteeing the terms of

their employment. Government inspections of fishing vessels, processing plants, and boat factories were rare.

Violations of minimum wage or overtime laws were frequent in many sectors but more common in the informal economy, which included domestic service, street vending, artisanal fishing, garbage collection, bus fare collection, donkey-cart driving, apprenticeship, auto repair, and other similar types of employment. No official entity provided social protections in the informal sector. The law excludes self-employed informal-sector workers from social insurance eligibility.